

Untitled document

By BILL SMITH

*The New Hampshire Union Leader, August 20, 2012*

MANCHESTER — Partisan politics in Washington, often accused of needlessly tying the hands of government, may be the savior when it comes to providing fuel assistance to the New Hampshire's neediest residents in the coming winter heating season.

An agreement by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev. and House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio to seek a six-month stopgap spending plan for federal agencies could blunt President Obama's recommendation for a cut in federal fuel assistance money.

Obama's recommendation could cost the poor of New Hampshire \$6 million in money for their fuel bills, according to the Campaign for Home Energy Assistance.

By law, the President must present budget recommendations in February for the federal fiscal year that begins Oct. 1.

But partisan bickering in Washington has turned funding the federal government into a series of "continuing resolutions" often enacted against the threat of government shutdown, rather than a single, comprehensive federal budget.

The United States has not had traditional federal budget in more than three years.

The agreement by Boehner and Reid for six-month stopgap funding would keep the government operating until April 30 — straight through the heating season — and aides to the state's lawmakers in Washington say it could mean funding the government at last year's levels.

For fuel assistance programs, last year's level means staving off reductions proposed by the President.

Federal law authorizes a maximum of \$5.1 billion in funding for fuel assistance programs provided to the states under the acronym LIHEAP for Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program.

Obama recommended \$3.02 billion for the new fiscal year, which represents a cut of \$450 million over funding provided last winter.

In New Hampshire, the proposal would have trimmed the fuel assistance funding for Hillsborough County by more than \$1.3 million.

The President's plan for cuts was made because energy prices were seen as stabilizing in February. Since then, prices have risen

Staffers in the state's Washington delegation told the New Hampshire Union Leader that while

Reid and Boehner have agreed on the outline of a six-month spending authorization, budgets for individual programs still have to be drafted by an assortment of Congressional committees.

Fuel assistance programs are administered by the five community action agencies in the state.

Louise Bergeron the energy director for Southern New Hampshire Services, which runs programs in Hillsborough and Rockingham counties, says a cut in funds last year, while tempered by a relatively mild winter, still had a serious impact on many Granite State families.

"The guidelines were decreased so a group that had gotten benefits for the past four or five years were reduced, since they were deemed to be over-income because the funds did not come up to the amount needed," Bergeron said.

An aide to U.S. Rep. Frank Guinta, the Republican who represents the 1st district, said the office is waiting to see what the House Appropriations Committee recommends for LIHEAP funding in the continuing budget resolution.

"Congressman Guinta is a very strong supporter and will remain a strong supporter and will vote to continue the funding," a spokesman said.

In a statement released by an aide, Rep Charles Bass, a Republican who represents the 2nd district, pledged to work on a "nonpartisan basis" for full-funding of LIHEAP in the continuing resolution.

The spokesman noted that Bass had joined 136 other Democratic and Republican members of the House, including Guinta, in signing a letter to leaders of the House Appropriations and the subcommittee that is considering fuel assistance funding calling for rejection of the proposed LIHEAP cuts.

Spokeswomen for Senators Kelly Ayotte (R) and Jeanne Shaheen (D) repeated previous statements of support for LIHEAP funding.

While the first snow of the winter of 2012-13 is, presumably, months away, the community action agencies are already processing applications for fuel assistance.

"We are taking applications as we speak," Bergeron noted.

"We are pre-registering for our priority clients — the elderly, the disabled and families with children under 6 years of age."